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Abstract

This study examines the frames used in reporting on the euro crisis. As far as the debt crisis is concerned, the media are the main source of information for European citizens. It is therefore interesting to carry out an in-depth content analysis of news coverage. The study looks into five dominant frames in Flemish (i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgium) and Dutch newspapers. *War* proved to be the most frequently used frame, followed by *disease*, *natural disaster*, *construction* and *game*. The prevalence of these frames was stable in both countries and from one type of newspaper to another.

Keywords

Content analysis, crisis news, euro, framing, newspapers

Introduction

The euro crisis has deeply affected the global economy. It goes without saying that the populations of the hardest hit countries, such as Greece, feel the effects most acutely. The northern countries of Europe too are increasingly faced with its direct effects. For the majority of citizens, the media are the pre-eminent source of information on subjects such as the euro crisis (Mylonas, 2012), which is characterized by a fair degree of complexity. The perception that people have of events depends on the information available, and on the way it is accessed (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). A content analysis of news coverage on the euro crisis is relevant because the dominant frames in the news are

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apt to produce a particular effect on the reader. Depending on the frame activated, a different set of cultural values and expectations may be triggered.

In this research, the outcomes of a European cross-country study on dominant frames of the euro crisis (Joris et al., in press) are tested for a particular region: the Low Countries. Furthermore, building on an earlier study about the frames of the euro crisis in Flemish newspapers (Joris et al., 2013), this article provides a short overview of how the European press has covered the crisis.

Metaphors and frames of the crisis

This study analyses the coverage from the point of view of framing. Framing starts from the assumption that the way a topic is portrayed may affect the way the public understands this topic and the importance they attach to it (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). For this study, the generally accepted definition of Entman (1993) is used: to frame is to *'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'* (p. 52). Before measuring the effects of framing, it is important to study which characteristics of news may be responsible for inducing these effects.

Along the same lines as Van Gorp (2010), frame packages were identified. Frame packages are integrated structures of framing devices and reasoning devices. Reasoning devices are the underlying, latent elements in a text, which can be discovered by careful study (definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendations) (Entman, 1993). Framing devices are clearly perceptible elements in a text or specific linguistic structures such as metaphors (e.g. the crisis presented as a storm or as an illness) (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

Furthermore, our theoretical framework is built on two previous studies. The first study examined the dominant frames of the euro crisis in Flemish newspapers (Joris et al., 2013). Three dominant frames were identified: combat, disease and natural disaster. The combat frame (84.3%) proved to be the most frequent one, followed by disease (40.4%), and natural disaster (19.2%).

The second study analysed the coverage in nine European countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain and United Kingdom (Joris et al., in press). In each news article, the first two metaphors were identified (in cooperation with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>). These metaphors were mainly found in the headline or the lead of the articles, which usually summarize the content of the entire article.

Eventually, five dominant frames were identified: war, disease, natural disaster, construction and game. The 'combat' frame in the Flemish study was rather broadly defined, being found in most news stories (84.3%). In the European cross-country study, this frame was divided into two separate frames, which differ in strength: 'war' and 'game'. The war frame refers to war and violence, whereas the game frame implies a rather friendly struggle between players. The frames 'disease' and 'natural disaster' were similar in both studies. However, in the European study, a new cluster of elements was

identified, referring to Europe as a 'construction'. In the next paragraphs each frame will be contextualized.

War

The war frame characterizes a battle between actors. A clash of interests between financial markets, rating agencies and/or the political world was very often discussed. Possible solutions in this frame are counter-attacks to defend a position, or peace and compromise. If the war frame is resorted to, the crisis will be chiefly viewed from the angle that the prominent actors are primarily self-interested. The reader will probably favour a solution beneficial to the greater whole and advocate solidarity, so that a war can be averted.

Disease

The disease frame is constructed around the idea that the crisis is caused by an illness. The selected remedy will determine the future: either the disease will be cured, or complete chaos and even death will follow. If the disease is given an effective treatment, for example, a financial injection or removal of ailing parts (e.g. particular countries), a full recovery may take place and further contagion may be avoided.

Natural disaster

The third frame portrays European countries or institutions suffering from natural disasters. Here we find weather-related issues (e.g. hurricanes), but also turbulent seas or rivers (e.g. tsunami). Some articles mention an avalanche or a quagmire. The natural disaster is caused by an unexpected and unpredictable event brought about by forces other than the acts of human beings. Consequently, there could be much economic damage and many victims. A possible solution is a rescue plan, which is also supposed to include prevention mechanisms.

Construction

The construction frame refers to the euro or the European project as an example of hubris, excessive optimism or overreaching itself. These articles suggest that the design of the euro was too ambitious and that its foundations were not strong enough. Consequently, the system might collapse, causing much damage. So the architecture needs to be reconsidered or renovated to keep it steady. 'Construction' can refer to a building or a house, but also to a train, a ship, an aeroplane or a machine. Overall, this frame will trigger the image that the construction of the euro was already weak at the outset. Consequently, the former and the present European leaders are the ones to blame for the crisis.

Game

In contrast with war, the game frame refers to a fairly friendly contest between players, who are challenged to participate in a game (e.g. arm wrestling, soccer, chess). All

players do their utmost to win. However, if the game is lost, the result is not as fatal as when a war is lost. Generally, this frame looks at the crisis as something more everyday than the other frames. As a result, the gravity of the crisis is downplayed.

Research question and hypotheses

The frames in the present study are mainly language-dependent mechanisms related to the use of metaphors, leading us to the following research question:

RQ: Which are the dominant frames in the coverage of the euro crisis in Flanders and the Netherlands?

Belgium and the Netherlands have always been more pro-European than most other countries, but the Dutch 'No' in the referendum concerning the European Constitution in 2005 might raise questions about the attitude of the Netherlands towards Europe. Since the use of metaphorical language may differ substantially between languages (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), the use of these frames might be largely similar in both countries because they share the same language. Nevertheless, research pointed out that Dutch newspapers carry proportionally more opinion pieces than Belgian newspapers (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2009). Moreover, opinion pieces are more susceptible to framing, since the authors intend to convince the reader by adducing arguments based upon values (Hoffman and Slater, 2007):

H1: Each frame will be more frequently used in Dutch than in Flemish newspapers.

Joris et al. (2013) found no significant difference in the prevalence of the frames between quality and popular newspapers. This study adds financial newspapers as a third category, newspapers which are known for their expertise in the field of economic issues. For readers of financial newspapers the euro crisis does not need to be simplified and so they are likely to frame less:

H2: There will be fewer frames in financial newspapers in comparison with other newspaper types.

De Landtsheer (2009) found that the number and strength of metaphors strongly relate to the evolution of a crisis: a large number of metaphors and frames in the initial stages of the crisis and when the crisis comes to a head:

H3: Framing frequency will be high at the beginning of the crisis and at its height (late 2011); subsequently framing frequency will decrease.

Methodology

The online databases Mediargus and LexisNexis were used to gather the articles ($N = 1073$), using the headwords '*euro*' and '*crisis*' in two financial newspapers, *De Tijd*

($n = 255$) and *Het Financieele Dagblad* ($n = 204$); two quality newspapers, *De Standaard* ($n = 244$) and *NRC Handelsblad* ($n = 221$); and two popular newspapers, *Het Laatste Nieuws* ($n = 89$) and *de Telegraaf* ($n = 60$).

All articles published 7 days before and 7 days after 11 major events between 2010 and 2012 were analysed:

1. EU summit of 11–12 February (4–18 February 2010);
2. Support for Greece (25 April–9 May 2010);
3. EU contract change (9–23 December 2010);
4. Austerity measures Italy (29 July–12 August 2011);
5. Greek general strike (28 September–12 October 2011);
6. EU summit of 26–27 October (20 October–3 November 2011);
7. Resignation Berlusconi - appointment Monti (5–19 November 2011);
8. Discussion euro bonds and more EC control (20–30 November 2011);
9. EU summit to boost growth (16–30 May 2012);
10. Spain's request for assistance and EU Summit (21 June–5 July 2012);
11. EU budget monitoring (8–22 July 2012).

For each article, the following variables were taken into account: newspaper, date, article length and presence of the frames. Training resulted in high scores of inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha) executed on a sample of 10% of the articles ($n = 108$) (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007): war ($\alpha = .81$), disease ($\alpha = .92$), natural disaster ($\alpha = .90$), construction ($\alpha = .72$) and game ($\alpha = .72$).

Results

Flanders (54.8%) published more articles about the crisis than the Netherlands (45.2%). Furthermore, most articles are published in quality newspapers (43.3%), followed by financial (42.8%) and popular newspapers (13.9%). Most articles were published in 2011 (53.3%). The number of articles in 2010 (23.4%) and 2012 (23.3%) was identical.

The length of articles was predominantly medium-sized (44.0%), followed by short news stories (less than 500 words) (36.8%). Long articles (more than 1000 words) were less frequent in our sample (19.2%). Article length differed significantly between the types of newspapers, $F(2,1070) = 35.056$; $p < .001$. The average length (1 = less than 500 words, 2 = between 500 and 1000 words, 3 = more than 1000 words) was the highest in quality newspapers ($M = 2.03$), followed by financial ($M = 1.70$) and popular newspapers ($M = 1.58$).

All five frames were found in the articles examined. War (47.1%) proved to be the most frequent frame. The following quotes exemplify this frame:

Europe has, since the Second World War, always been an economic and political battle field, and the present battle field is bloodier than ever before. (Jonker, 30 June 2012)

Observers expect a set of measures to be taken that speculators will not be able to cope with – measures which are referred to as a financial bazooka. (X, 12 October 2011)

The disease frame (32.2%) ranked second:

This is like a serious heart condition. You can't go on putting in new stents every day for in the end you will die. (Stellinga, 25 May 2012)

Yesterday the ECB merely applied a plaster to the wound, thus stopping the bleeding for a short while. But that's no more than first aid. To stop the hemorrhage once and for all a more drastic intervention is required. The wound needs to be stitched, the sooner the better, and that is a job for the European heads of government. Otherwise the blood will soon begin to ooze through the plaster. (Michielsen, 9 August 2011)

The construction frame came third (26.4%):

He deplores that Portugal is so often mentioned as the next piece to fall in the domino game of tottering economies. (van Beemen, 22 December 2010)

The concrete of the European house is badly degraded: not only does the building need urgent repairs, it also needs a new architectural design. (X, 25 June 2012)

The natural disaster frame (18.9%) was less frequently used:

We have never sailed on tranquil waters. But in the last four years we have gone through heavy turbulence, real storms and unexpected hurricanes. (van der Vaart, 7 October 2011)

It's like an avalanche: it begins with a small snowball, but if you don't build a wall, the snowball becomes bigger and bigger. (Verschuere, 5 August 2011)

The crisis as a game (13.7%) was the least frequently used frame:

Italy vs Germany is the match of the euro crisis. Rome relies on the short tackle, Berlin on extra time. (Van Haver, 27 June 2012)

What we see here is just a game of poker between French President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel. (X, 19 November 2011)

One in five (21.2%) articles, chiefly short articles, proved not to feature any of these frames. In a very small number of articles (0.6%) the five frames were found to occur together. This does not conflict with the criterion of mutual exclusivity, since at the level of the article several frames may occur together.

The average number of frames in each article did not differ between the Netherlands and Flanders, $t(1042,394) = -1.215$; $p = .225$. Moreover, Dutch newspapers did not publish more opinion pieces or editorials than Flemish ones, $\chi^2(1) = .027$; $p = .869$. Furthermore, the prevalence of the frames was slightly different between Flanders and the Netherlands (see Figure 1). In both countries, the dominant frame was war, followed by disease and construction. The fourth frame in Flanders was natural disaster, whereas in the Netherlands it was the game frame. Furthermore, war, $t(1036,257) = 2.497$; $p < .05$,

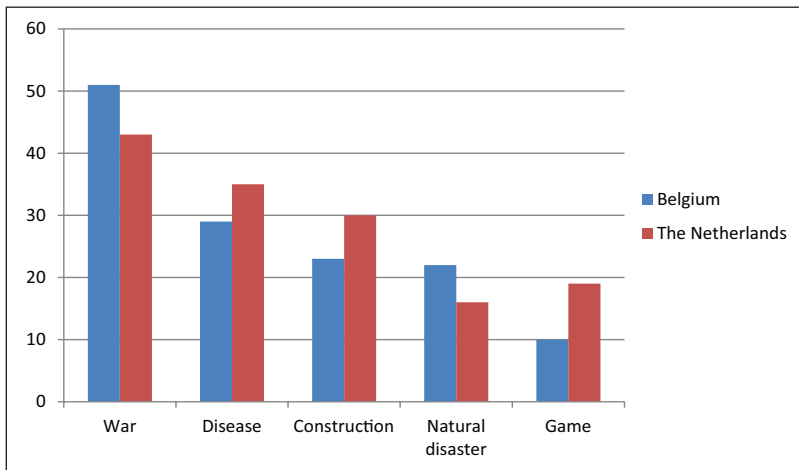


Figure 1. Presence of dominant frames of the euro crisis (%).

and natural disaster, $t(1065,928) = 2.502$; $p < .05$, occurred significantly more often in Flanders. By contrast, in Dutch newspapers the frames disease, $t(1012,029) = -2.102$; $p < .05$; construction, $t(998,564) = -2.364$; $p < .05$; and game, $t(889,437) = -4.126$; $p < .001$, were more frequent. Overall, the hypothesis that Dutch newspapers would use more frames was not confirmed.

The relative occurrence of the frames was identical in all newspaper types: war as most dominant frame, followed by disease, construction, natural disaster and game. There was no difference found between the newspapers, except for natural disaster, which occurred more in financial newspapers, $F(2,1070) = 3.299$; $p < .05$. However, the number of frames per article differed significantly between the newspapers, $F(2,1070) = 3.692$; $p < .05$. The largest number was identified in quality newspapers ($M = 1.44$), followed by financial ($M = 1.39$) and popular newspapers ($M = 1.17$). As previously mentioned, articles in popular newspapers were shorter than those in quality or financial newspapers. So, if we check for the article length, it appears that there is no significant difference in the number of frames between the newspapers, $F(2,1069) = 2.182$; $p = .113$. Consequently, the second hypothesis is not confirmed. The number of frames is comparable in all types of newspapers.

The dominance of the frames over the entire period of time is one issue, another is the question whether there is any variation in their frequency over time. It transpires that the frames war, disease and construction peaked in the first two periods and then slightly declined, except during some particular events. The war frame had a new peak throughout the 5th period (see Figure 2). Since the 5th period centres around the general strike in Greece, the use of metaphors referring to war is not surprising. Disease and construction mainly peaked in the 9th period of the study, during which there was a summit on growth (instead of focusing on austerity measures only). The explanation of the increase might be that the illness received a new diagnosis and another cure was recommended (disease), or the structure of the euro was reanalysed and renovation of the construction

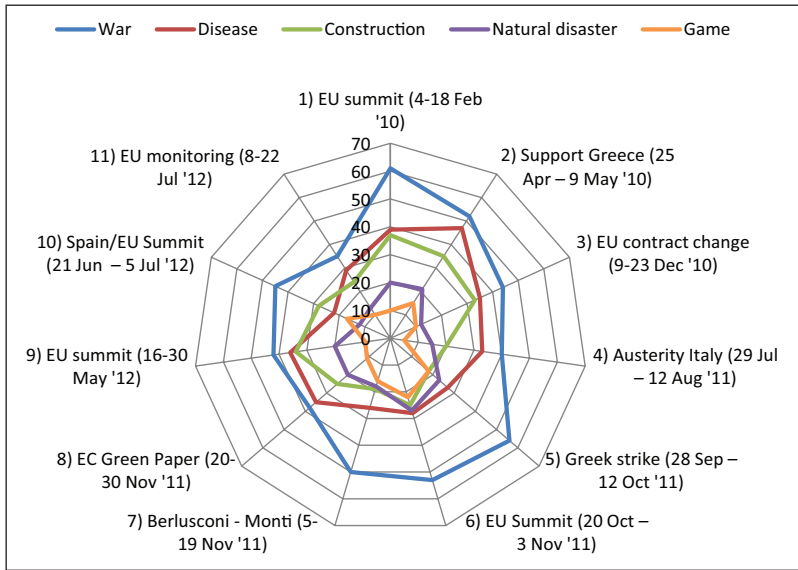


Figure 2. Presence of dominant frames throughout periods under study (%).

was reconsidered (construction). Natural disaster and game remained fairly stable, except during the 6th period (20 October– 3 November 2011), when the euro crisis broke out in all its severity (see Joris et al., 2013). Generally, the use of frames was more widespread in the initial stages of the crisis, as it helped to gain insight into the new and unclear situation. Furthermore, the number of frames increased during crisis situations, while the number decreased in tranquil times. This pattern confirms our third hypothesis.

Discussion

Flanders (54.8%) published more articles than the Netherlands, thus paying more attention to the crisis. Most articles were published in quality newspapers (43.3%), closely followed by financial newspapers (42.8%), and finally the popular press (13.9%). Five dominant frames were identified: in order of importance, war, disease, construction, natural disaster and game.

The relative occurrence of these frames was slightly different between Flanders and the Netherlands. In both countries, war was the most frequent frame, followed by disease and construction. The fourth frame was natural disaster in Flanders, and game in the Netherlands. Moreover, war and natural disaster occurred significantly more often in Flanders. Nevertheless, in Dutch newspapers, the frames disease, construction and game were more often used. Furthermore, there was no difference in the number of frames between both countries. It follows that the first hypothesis is only partially borne out.

The presence of the frames did not significantly differ between the newspaper types. Surprisingly, financial newspapers have roughly the same number of frames. The use of

frames was high at the start of the crisis, as it facilitated the understanding of the new and complex situation. Furthermore, the number of frames peaked during crisis situations.

Framing may refer to things that remain unspoken but which can be activated by using a specific frame. Clearly, the dominance of these frames can implicitly determine how the crisis is perceived. Questioning the reader is the appropriate way to find out to what degree frames activate images in the reader's mind, and how these images then influence the way he or she looks at the crisis.

Furthermore, the occurrence of the frames was similar in all types of newspapers and in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Consequently, we may raise the question whether these dominant frames are either language/context specific or potentially universal. Therefore, it might be interesting to study the occurrence of these frames in other European countries. Questions worth answering would be as follows: Would there be cross-cultural differences? Would there be a variance in frames between the northern, economically stronger countries and the southern countries facing major sovereign debt problems? Is there a different use of frames between euro zone countries and countries not belonging to the euro zone such as Poland and United Kingdom? However, the lack of difference in framing between the newspapers under study might also be caused by the use of the same sources of news (e.g. European leaders and news agencies). Therefore, in further research, it is recommended to focus more on the different sources of information that are mentioned, quoted or paraphrased in the news stories across countries.

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